

HIGGINS RESTORES RODMAN DRAKE PARK

Bronx Park Commissioner, After
Years of Neglect, Puts Poet's
Tomb in Order.

HIS FAMILY HAD PROTESTED

Man Who Composed "The American
Flag" Was Buried in a Private
Cemetery at Hunt's Point.

It will probably surprise many persons who have deplored in the last dozen years the neglected condition of the grave of James Rodman Drake, author of "The Culprit Fay" and "The American Flag," to learn that his tomb is now being restored to a semblance of neatness. The body of the poet is buried in the Borough of the Bronx, about a mile to the west of Hunt's Point. He was buried in the old Hunt family burial ground, and when, several years ago, that part of the Bronx was laid out into regular city streets and no provision was made for retaining the historic spot, many protests arose from various historic societies and literary associations.

As a result of these protests the city altered the original street plan so as to retain the burial plot as a little park, and it has since been known as the James Rodman Drake Park. Petitions have been made from time to time for a satisfactory appropriation to put the park, which contains half a dozen acres, into proper condition. The money has not yet been forthcoming, but Park Commissioner Higgins somewhat over a month ago assumed the responsibility for doing what he could to make the neglected square look like a park, and from the regular park appropriations he has succeeded in accomplishing more in the last three weeks than has ever been done before.

The new Park Commissioner of the Bronx has gone about his work without any fanfare of trumpets, and even the officers of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, who have persistently urged for many years the restoration of the park, were not aware yesterday that actual work had begun.

"Now that we have started," said the Commissioner yesterday, "perhaps we will get in the near future the necessary funds to fill in the swamp and low ground at the rear of the park, put an attractive fence around it, and make it a credit to the Bronx as well as to the city.

"I am having the paths repaired, a number of shrubs and trees planted, the old trees trimmed up, the weeds and brambles cut out, and all of the old tombstones have been straightened and many which have been prone on the ground for a quarter of a century or more have been put in place. The masonry of the Drake grave, the most imposing monument in the place, has been renewed, and within a couple of weeks the little Drake park will be well worth visiting."

To fittingly commemorate the completion of the work Commissioner Higgins has drawn up a tentative plan for a celebration at the park on Memorial Day. Charles De Kay will speak and a delegation of students from the Morris High School will be present, and one of them will recite Drake's famous poem, "The American Flag." This is the opening stanza:

When Freedom from her mountain heights
Unfurled her standard to the air,
She tore the azure robe of night,
And set the stars of glory there,
She mingled with its gorgeous dyes
The milky baldrick of the skies,
And striped its pure, celestial white,
With streakings of the morning light.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Brownson Literary Union in 1891 had shown its admiration for the poet who was cut off from a life of great literary promise at the age of 25 years, by restoring the monument, years of neglect had so injured the tomb that a short time ago the descendants of the poet were about to request the Park Department for permission to remove the body.

James Rodman Drake was born in the lower part of the city in 1795. He was married in 1816 to a daughter of Henry Eckford, the famous shipbuilder, and in that year he composed his most famous poem, "The Culprit Fay." His ode to the American Flag was composed in 1819, the year before his death. He had been afflicted with consumption for some time and, as the inscription on the tomb states, he died Sept. 21, 1820, and his closest friend, Fitz-Greene Halleck, wrote in his memory those lines:

None knew thee but to love thee,
Nor named thee but to praise.

His tomb consists of a plain marble shaft seven feet high on a marble base about three feet square. He spent much of his time during his later years at the old Hunt homestead on Hunt's Point. The little park is not far from the Hunt's Point station on the New Haven branch line running from Mott Haven to New Rochelle, and is about a mile east of the Intervale Avenue station of the Subway.

Commissioner Higgins is having a handsome flagpole erected in the park near the tomb, and the first flag that has ever flown over the grave will be unfurled there on Decoration Day.